

How to Kill Three Birds with One Dictation

By Eva Homolova

Dictation is usually described as a teaching method by which the learners are exposed to some spoken input, and after holding it in their memory for a short time they write what they have heard. According to Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988), there are 10 good reasons why we use it in the EFL class. Dictation

- activates students during the activity;
- activates students after this activity;
- leads to oral communicative activities;
- fosters unconscious learning;
- can be used with large classes;
- works with mixed-ability classes;
- often calms groups;
- is safe for nonnative teachers;
- is a technically useful exercise for English;
- gives access to interesting texts.

I personally agree with these reasons. However, the traditional dictation, which is quite frequently used in our schools, even with very young learners at the beginning of their exposure to English, can be a nightmare for students. The reason why this is so lies in the teachers themselves. Many teachers consider dictation primarily to be a useful tool to keep students quiet and busy. At the same time it offers an easy but restricted and unreliable way to assess students. In other words, a traditional dictation caters to the traditional teachers' needs. It is designed not for the benefit of the learners but for the security and power it gives teachers (point eight above). The other potential benefits listed by Davis and Rinvoluceri are negated largely because of the fear element; dictation is often testing not teaching. This attitude is enhanced in our country due to the frequency of use of dictation in the mother tongue, Slovak, for which a very strict marking scale for a prescriptive grammar system produces low scores. When a similar marking scale and attitude is transferred to English dictation, it is not surprising that learners react negatively.

As stated earlier, Davis and Rinvoluceri have suggested ways to resurrect dictation as a teaching tool. Inspired by their many variations on the technique, I would like to describe how I have turned it upside down and killed three birds with one stone by using the following activity in the classrooms.

Level: beginners to intermediate (depending on the lexical set used)

Time: 10-20 minutes

Language: structure-there is/there are; prepositions/prepositional phrases-
in the middle, in the bottom left corner, between, in the top right corner,

above, etc; lexical set-geometrical objects and lines

Elementary level:

Intermediate level:

Materials:

One card per pair of students with different objects in various colours and different positions. Each card should be slightly different.

Procedure:

1. Ask the students to get into pairs and sit back to back. One member of the pair gets a card but does not show it to the partner.
2. The one with the card starts to dictate what he or she sees in the picture (e. g., there is a red circle in the middle) and the other partner draws what he or she understands. They continue until the picture is complete.
3. As a final step the partners compare the card with the picture and assess each other's performance.
4. Afterwards they get a new card and change the roles. The activity can go on until they draw all cards.

Discussion

Elementary-level students form the largest group of English learners in Slovakia, but they are somehow neglected by authors who suggest teaching ideas. With this type of activity, a teacher can make several variations depending on the age and level of students in the class.

We can use parts of the body, fruits and vegetables, furniture, numbers, and so forth. For young learners I recommend using different colours and larger cards. A variation for the intermediate level can be "polite" dictation where the student who dictates has to use different registers, for example:

- Would you draw....., please?
 - Could you draw, please?
 - Would you mind drawing....., etc.
 - And what are the "birds" I kill with this activity?
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1. Students are active and produce meaningful language.
 2. It is easy for the overworked teacher.
 3. Students enjoy doing it. From time to time I hear: "Let's draw a

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References

- Davis, P. and M. Rinvold. 1988. Dictation: New methods, new possibilities. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.